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SUBJECT: KURDS IN NORTHERN IRAQ: PUK REP CLAIMS NINEWA "HANGS IN THE
BALANCE" OF IRAQ STABILITY

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REASON: 1.4 (a), (b), (d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) According to the Western Ninewa director of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, Mustafa Khokhe, Ninewa province "hangs in the balance." Ethnic tensions and the flow of terrorism from Iraq's neighbors are all contributing to a potentially combustible situation, he claims. He says Tal Afar, with its predominantly Shia and Sunni Turkoman, would collapse if Iraqi President Talabani and U.S. Ambassador Khalilzad did not personally intervene. Khokhe asks that U.S. and Coalition Forces not draw down since insurgents led by former Baathists and Osama bin Laden are waiting to "take over" the country. If problems could be corrected in Ninewa, he says, it would have a positive impact on the rest of the country. Khokhe believes, however, that only the U.S. can help. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) PRT PolOff met with Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) Western Ninewa Director Mustafa Khokhe in Mosul on March 27.

TERROR IN WESTERN NINEWA

¶3. (C) After spending the past four months for the PUK in western Ninewa, Khokhe said he has seen what he believed was the real center of problems in Iraq. Terrorists -- mainly from Saudi Arabia, Iran, Syria, and Turkey -- were freely moving across Ninewa's border with Syria, he claimed. It was not just that the border patrol was weak on both sides, but also that Iraq has had to combat years of smuggling rings that have not ceased since the fall of the former regime. "The same people are in charge," said Khokhe, naming the Shammur tribe and Al Yawar family (relatives of Vice President Sheikh Ghazi Al Yawar) of being behind the organized movement of contraband. During the former regime, he claimed, the Al Yawar family was given free reign in the area, and for that reason tackling this problem would be "very complicated." The solution, according to Khokhe, was to "seal the border" with Coalition Forces (CF) and Iraqi Army (IA).

14. (C) Problems at the border paled in comparison with what he claimed were the dire state of affairs in Tal Afar. "There are still areas not under Coalition, Peshmerga, or Iraqi control," he said. The reason why the dilemma in Tal Afar was more complex was the predominance of Turkoman there, divided into Sunni and Shia factions. Also complicating matters was the presence of the Badr Army, and Turkish, Iranian, and Syrian intelligence. The situation was "so tight and divisive" that he believed it called for the direct intervention of Iraqi President Jalal Talabani and U.S. Ambassador Khalilzad, he said.

"The top leaders need to be involved," said Khokhe, "because they understand Islam and can sit down with the tribal leaders."

According to Khokhe, there was an Islamic tradition where peace treaties were brought about by an intervening party that conducted a series of meetings over dinner, where "money" was exchanged to settle past scores. He claimed this process was "very successful" in the past. Talabani and Khalilzad were needed because, he said, "No one else has the resources to get [the warring sides] together." The tribes in question were members of the Shia, Sunni, and Turkoman communities.

15. (C) Mosul, on the other hand, was still influenced by Sunni Baathists who were reluctant to let go of the city after the fall of the regime, he said. He accused them of funding terrorists in the city. Khokhe said the governor's public comments about Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) being in control in the city were false. More Peshmerga and CF were needed to secure the western side of Mosul, claimed Khokhe, since it served as a "pathway" for terrorists to enter the city. Speaking on Iraqi Kurdistan, Khokhe claimed that the Syrian government also had operatives or double agents in the Kurdish ranks that did not want to see a viable and strong Kurdistan. The Syrians were intimately involved, he said, because they knew a protected Kurdish area would affect internal policies within their own country. "This area will be the center of conflict for the next 100 years," said Khokhe when speaking about Kurdish attempts to build a state in the Middle East. "It will cause regional problems in the future," he said.

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USG IS THE ONLY FORCE THAT CAN HELP

16. (C) Correcting these issues was of utmost importance to Khokhe because he believed if Ninewa contained the terrorist threat it would have a great impact on the situation in Iraq. The current situation in Tal Afar was "fertile ground for terror." Baathists were paranoid because they were seeing their grip on power "slipping away." And more importantly, Syria was doing everything within its power to thwart all U.S. efforts at democracy in Iraq because it was a real threat to that country's leadership. Khokhe suggested that job opportunities be created with the ISF to make the forces more representative and allow for local buy-in from the people. "They would feel they have something at stake in the future of Iraq," claimed Khokhe, "and they would be tied into the process." Good people from all walks of life wanted to help but were discouraged by threats, intimidation, and general fear for their lives, he said.

17. (C) Khokhe pointedly asked that U.S. and CF forces "never be withdrawn" because he claimed the terrorists, led by Osama bin Laden, would be waiting to "take control" of Iraq as soon as the U.S. departed. He said recent elections in Palestine where Hamas took control, and Islamic party victories in Iran and Turkey were all "interconnected." Iraq waited in the balance, he said, and for this reason the U.S. could not "do anything foolish." An Iraq controlled by terrorists, claimed Khokhe, was a "big threat on the global level." The GOI was nothing more than "ink on paper," since politics was controlled by "corruption and bribes," he said. After all, Saudi Wahabists bordered Iraq on one side and Iranian Shia on the other, and both were "united against" the U.S., he said. For this reason it was up to the U.S. to take the lead to correct the issue.

COMMENT

18. (C) Khokhe's words paint a very bleak picture of the state of stability in Ninewa and the country. He is not the PUK's most authoritative voice, but he has a unique perspective: he has spent the better part of the last four months in Sinjar, Tal Afar, and Rabiya, and believes his sources of information (which span across ethnic and religious divides, he claims) are credible and accurate. His request that U.S. and CF forces not be drawn down anytime soon reflects Kurdish concern if they are left to fend for themselves. In previous conversations, Khokhe has repeatedly expressed apprehension over this issue, especially since as he noted before, that many of Iraq's neighbors would not prefer to see a Kurdish state -- whether part of Iraq or independent -- in the future. Our view is less apocalyptic than Khokhe's, but we hear concerns such as his from other sources familiar with the borderlands.

MUNTER